

## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

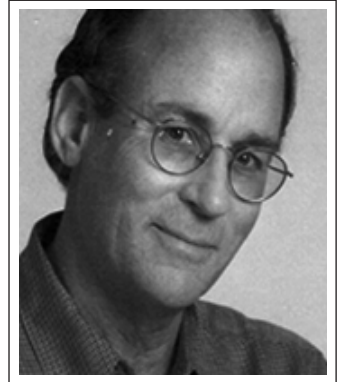
### Author: Tracy Kidder

An American author and Vietnam War veteran. Kidder may be best known, especially within the computing community, for his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Soul of a New Machine*, an account of the development of Data General's Eclipse/MV minicomputer. Kidder followed up with *House*, in which he chronicles the design and construction of the award-winning Souweine House in Amherst, Massachusetts. *House* reads like a novel, but it is based on many hours of research with the architect, builders, clients, in-laws, and other interested parties.

**Name:** Tracy Kidder

**Born:** November 12, 1945, in New York, NY.

**Education:** Harvard University, A.B., 1967; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1974.



### Career:

Writer, 1974—. Contributing editor, *Atlantic Monthly*, Boston, 1982—. Military service: U.S. Army, 1967-69, served in intelligence in Vietnam; became first lieutenant.

### Awards:

Atlantic First Award, *Atlantic Monthly*, for short story "The Death of Major Great"; Sidney Hillman Foundation Prize, 1978, for article, "Soldiers of Misfortune"; Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, 1982, both for *The Soul of a New Machine*; National Book Critics Circle nomination (nonfiction), 1986, for *House*; Christopher Award and National Book Critics Circle Award nomination (nonfiction), 1989, Robert F. Kennedy Award and Ambassador Book Award, 1990, all for *Among Schoolchildren*; New England Book Award, 1994, for *Old Friends*.

### Past Writings:

*The Road to Yuba City: A Journey into the Juan Corona Murders*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1974.

*The Soul of a New Machine*, Little, Brown (Boston), 1981, revised edition, Modern Library (New York, NY), 1997.

*House*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston), 1985.

*Among Schoolchildren*, Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

*Old Friends*, Houghton Mifflin, 1993, large print edition, Wheeler, 1993.

*Home Town*, Random House, 1999.

*Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, Random House, 2003.

Contributor to newspapers and magazines, including *the New York Times Book Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Country Journal*.



## Author: Tracy Kidder (2)

### Sidelights:

In several critically acclaimed and award-winning nonfiction books, Tracy Kidder has combined meticulous research and reportorial skills to produce fascinating portrayals of subjects as diverse as elementary education, homebuilding, and nursing homes. Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine* proved by its critical reception that technical subjects can be comprehensible and intriguing to laymen when they are skillfully presented. Winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1982, the book details the eighteen-month-long struggle of engineers at Data General Corporation to create a competitive super-mini computer. Kidder, a newcomer to this highly technical world, spent months in a basement laboratory at the corporation's Massachusetts headquarters observing teams of young engineers at work: the hardware specialists, or "Hardy Boys," who put the computer's circuitry together, and the "Micro-kids," who developed the code that fused the hardware and software of the system. In telling the story of the assembly, setbacks, and perfection of the thirty-two "bit" prototype computer, the Eagle, Kidder exposes the inner workings of a highly competitive industry, illustrates both concentrated teamwork and moments of virtuosity on the part of the project's brilliant engineers, and produces what reviewer Edward R. Weidlein, in the *Washington Post Book World*, judged "a true-life adventure" and "compelling entertainment."

Many critics cited Kidder's masterful handling of the complex subject matter in *The Soul of a New Machine* as one of the book's strongest features. "Even someone like this reviewer," wrote Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times*, "who barely understood the difference between computer hardware and software when he began *The Soul of a New Machine*, was able to follow every step of the debugging mystery, even though it involves binary arithmetic, Boolean algebra, and a grasp of the difference between a System Cache and an Instruction Processor." Weidlein concurred, observing that Kidder "offers a fast, painless, enjoyable means to an initial understanding of computers, allowing us to understand the complexity of machines we could only marvel at before."

Kidder's portraits of the Eagle's engineers were applauded by critics as well. A *New Yorker* reviewer proclaimed that Kidder "gives a full sense of the mind and motivation, the creative genius of the computer engineer." And a *Saturday Review* critic claimed that *The Soul of a New Machine* "tells a human story of tremendous effort." Critics also lauded *The Soul of a New Machine* for its departure from the standard journalistic approach to nonfiction. Jeremy Bernstein, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, declared, "I strongly recommend Tracy Kidder's book. I do not know anything quite like it. It tells a story far removed from our daily experience, and while it may seem implausible, it has the ring of truth."

Following the working style he established in *The Soul of a New Machine*, Kidder immersed himself once again in the workaday world of a diverse group of individuals for his next book, *House*. Documenting the construction of a new home from blueprints to finished product, *House* presents the pleasures and pitfalls that occur at all phases of the building process. The book allows the reader to view that process through the eyes of the seven adults involved: architect and "Renaissance man in delirium" Bill Rawn, the quartet of counterculturist builders known as the Apple Corps, and the prospective homeowners, Jonathan and Judith Souweine. Kidder, who spent six months observing all aspects of the construction, as well as the lives of the people involved, traces their combined efforts to design, finance, and build the house, and places special emphasis on the parties' abilities to forge relationships under somewhat trying circumstances.

Reviewers noted that the theme of *House* centers on the building of these relationships, and of the lines of trust and communication necessary for the relationships to occur. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Esther McCoy noted: "*House* . . . essentially is concerned with the people who build the house and their interaction with clients and architect." The ties do not come easily, however, as the participants haggle and argue about the various problems that arise. A rift develops between the Souweines and the Apple Corps over the final \$660 of the



**Author:** Tracy Kidder (3)

### Sidelights: (Continued)

\$146,660 construction cost; in another instance, the builders are at odds with Rawn over his underdeveloped designs for a staircase. Commenting on the give-and-take nature of these dealings, Paul Goldberger of the *New York Times Book Review* stated: "The clients, the architect and the builders form a kind of triangle . . . and they push and pull each other in every possible way." Jonathan Yardley, writing in the *Washington Post Book World*, agreed, adding, "The construction of a house is an undertaking that puts human beings in an odd relationship of cooperation and conflict, a relationship that begins as business but invariably acquires intensely personal overtones."

To some reviewers, these "personal overtones" were also reflected in Kidder's quiet observations of the differences in the characters' social positions and the tensions that exist as those distinctions become more and more apparent. Though three members of the Apple Corps "had upbringings more white collar than blue collar," Goldberger wrote, "they are aware that their lives are different from those of people like Mr. and Mrs. Souweine." Kidder approached the situation democratically, claimed R. Z. Sheppard in *Time*, giving "equal time to client, architect and builders." Sheppard went on to find that "the interplay between confident professionals and self-conscious craftsmen conveys much about misunderstandings and bad feelings in a society stratified by education and status."

*House* does more than chronicle the relationships that developed over the course of the home's construction; it is also a nuts-and-bolts account of the construction itself. In addition, Kidder fills the book with a collection of short essays on topics as varied as the history of nails and a cost analysis of Henry Thoreau's Walden Pond shelter, so that *House* becomes more a study of architectural lore than a how-to of homebuilding. "The book keeps opening out into discourses on welcome, unexpected subjects," stated *Newsweek* reviewer David Lehman, "Kidder's book is filled with this kind of unobtrusive information." Affirming Kidder's inclusion of these asides, Adele Freedman of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* claimed: "After reading *House*, no one will ever take the design of a staircase or the installation of a window for granted."

As with *The Soul of a New Machine*, Kidder earned praise for his clear presentation of unfamiliar terms and operations. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times* found Kidder "a master at the difficult art of describing complex objects and processes." Citing the parallels in style between *The Soul of a New Machine* and *House*, *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Max J. Friedman declared that Kidder wrote *House* "with the same thoroughness, attention to detail and technical explanation that marked the earlier work . . . Kidder's careful, precise reportage and brand of literary verite take us on a remarkable journey into the technical, mechanical and emotional world of housebuilding." Finally, Goldberger summarized the feelings of many critics with his statement that *House* "is told with such clarity, intelligence and grace it makes you wonder why no one has written a book like it before."

Kidder changed his subject matter but retained his reportorial methods for *Among Schoolchildren*, a record of the nine months he spent observing a Holyoke, Massachusetts, elementary school classroom. The book follows thirty-four-year-old Chris Zajac and her class of twenty fifth-grade students from their first day together at Kelly School to their last. In order to gather his material, Kidder placed himself at a desk in the front of the classroom, right next to Mrs. Zajac's own. He remained there, a silent observer on the scene, for nearly 180 schooldays. "I missed two days all year," Kidder told *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Amanda Smith. "One I just played hooky, and the other one, I was sick." The author eventually took over 10,000 pages of notes, compiled from his own observations and his frequent talks with Mrs. Zajac, which he then assembled, edited, and reworked into the finished book.

Written from Zajac's point of view, *Among Schoolchildren* serves as an account of the teacher's thoughts and feelings about her day-to-day teaching decisions and provides a first-hand look at what occurs in an American classroom. Kidder drew praise for his portrayals of the diminutive, energetic Zajac and her "fragile rubber raft





**Author:** Tracy Kidder (4)

### **Sidelights: (Continued)**

of children," as *New York Times Book Review* contributor Phyllis Theroux called them. Students like the hyperactive, destructive Clarence, the barely literate Pedro, who was "born and raised with my grandmother, because I was cryin' too much," and the intelligent, introverted Judith test the limits of Zajac's teaching skills and patience. Because of his proximity to the participants, especially Zajac, Kidder was able to get "inside her head and inside the heads of the children," reflected Gerald Grant in the *Chicago Tribune Books*, adding that the author's "close observations of the children in their many moods tie us into the emotional networks that make up classroom life." Those thoughts were echoed by *New York Times* reviewer Eva Hoffman, who asserted: "By the end of the book, we appreciate Mrs. Zajac's skills and strengths, and we come to care about the children's small hurts and triumphs."

Aside from providing insights into these characters, *Among Schoolchildren* also tackles some of the difficult issues facing the American educational system. Talking about the progress of reform with Smith, Kidder noted that "most efforts at reform usually are conducted independently of the experience, knowledge, wishes of teachers. And that's a terrible mistake, of course, since, for better or worse, education is what happens in these little rooms." Several reviewers found Kidder's observations worthy of praise. "Kidder writes with sensitivity . . . of the need for educational reform," a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer judged. "We see Kelly School as a compelling microcosm of what is wrong—and right—with our educational system." Grant concurred, adding: "Tracy Kidder has written a wonderful, compassionate book about teaching. While we have some cause for despair about the operation of the system, we have grounds for hope if his book helps draw more Mrs. Zajacs into our classrooms." And Phillip Lopate in the *Washington Post Book World* stressed: "At a time when public education seems to be fair game for attacks from all sides, Tracy Kidder has written a celebration of the work of one good schoolteacher."

Kidder's next book was a foray into the world of a nursing home. With much the same technique he used in his other "journalistic" works, in *Old Friends* Kidder spent a year observing the lives of the residents of Linda Manor, a nursing home near Northampton, Massachusetts. The residents of the nursing home are a diverse group, including the former actress Eleanor, who at eighty years of age is running the facility's theater program; Ted, a former morse-code operator who still drums the code on the arms of his chair; Winifred, who because of her obesity must be winched into her wheelchair every day; and Fleur, a ninety-two-year-old who is convinced she is still at summer camp. The narrative focuses, however, on Joe Torchio and Lou Freed, two reluctant roommates forced together out of economic necessity. After living together, their friendship grows, despite their apparent differences. A well-educated former probation officer, Joe was incapacitated by a stroke in his early fifties. Now, at seventy-two, he is young enough to be Lou's son. Lou, ninety-two, is a retired machinist whose beloved wife has just died. During the book's course, Kidder shows their happiness at being able-bodied enough to live on the top floor (the one requiring the least assistance), their thoughts about life and death, and their hopes and disappointments. Paul Hemphill related in the *Los Angeles Times* that the book shows "that behind those doors and inside those wasted bodies there are hearts and souls still lusting to go around the block one more time, no matter how reduced the circumstances."

David L. Kirp, writing in the *Nation* found fault with the book, calling the writing "mainly treacly, and that evinces another, related kind of failed vision, another misuse of authorial omniscience." He believed that the book "emphasizes the superficial and noncontroversial," and stays away from important, yet untidy, aspects of the clients lives. However, Reeve Lindbergh, writing in the *Washington Post Book World* commented that Kidder has a "breathtaking writer's skill," adding that "the real tour de force here . . . is the author's ability to look so closely and unsentimentally at the sufferings of age, and yet with such unwavering affection for the individual aged." Lindbergh concluded that "this beautifully written and remarkably compassionate book, my own favorite in Tracy Kidder's impressive body of work, shows us the way."



## Author: Tracy Kidder (5)

### Sidelights: (Continued)

In his best-known books, Tracy Kidder has shown himself to be adept at creating works of nonfiction that, as he told Smith, “do a lot of the things that novels do.” By using similar research and writing techniques for all of his works, Kidder has discovered a formula for success, yet his books are far from formulaic. Critics have complimented Kidder’s ability to transform the ordinary and everyday into something fascinating, a talent that Friedman termed Kidder’s “penchant . . . for taking the reader on a journey into undiscovered knowledge.” But as informative and entertaining as those journeys may be, the focus of Kidder’s energy is on the people who inhabit his books. Speaking of his writing to Smith, Kidder admits that one of his purposes is “to bring people to life on the page.” According to reviewers, who agree with Theroux’s summation that Kidder’s works are “full of the author’s genuine love, delight and celebration of the human condition,” he does so successfully.



**Author:** Tracy Kidder (6)

**Further Reading:**

*Business Week*, November 1, 1993, p. 18.  
*Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 1985.  
*Globe and Mail* (Toronto), December 14, 1985.  
*Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1985; September 12, 1993, p. 1, 9.  
*Nation*, April 11, 1994, p. 490.  
*New Leader*, September 6, 1993, p. 18.  
*New Statesman*, May 20, 1994, p. 39.  
*Newsweek*, October 28, 1985.  
*New Yorker*, October 19, 1981.  
*New York Review of Books*, October 8, 1981.  
*New York Times*, August 11, 1981; September 5, 1985; October 3, 1985; August 30, 1989.  
*New York Times Book Review*, August 23, 1981; November 29, 1981; October 6, 1985; September 17, 1989; October 3, 1993, p. 1.  
*Publishers Weekly*, July 21, 1989; September 15, 1989; July 26, 1993, p. 50; October 10, 1994, p. 67.  
*Saturday Review*, December, 1981.  
*Time*, October 14, 1985; October 11, 1993, p. 86.  
*Tribune Books* (Chicago), August 13, 1989.  
*Washington Post Book World*, September 9, 1981; October 6, 1985; September 3, 1989; September 19, 1993, p. 4.  
*Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2004.



## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

### Discussion Questions:

1. Paul Farmer finds ways of connecting with people whose backgrounds are vastly different from his own. How does he do this? Are his methods something to which we can all aspire?
2. Paul Farmer believes that "if you're making sacrifices—you're trying to lessen some psychic discomfort" (p. 24). Do you agree with the way that Farmer makes personal sacrifices? For what kinds of things do you make sacrifices, and when do you expect others to make them?
3. Kidder points out that Farmer is dissatisfied with the current distribution of money and medicine in the world. What is your opinion of the distribution of these forms of wealth? What would you change, if you could?
4. Farmer designed a study to find out whether there was a correlation between his Haitian patients' belief in sorcery as the cause of TB and their recovery from that disease through medical treatment. What did he discover about the relative importance of cultural beliefs among his impoverished patients and their material circumstances? Do you think that this discovery might have broad application—for instance, to situations in the United States?
5. The title of the book comes from the Haitian proverb, "Beyond mountains there are mountains." What does the saying mean in the context of the culture it comes from, and what does it mean in relation to Farmer's work? Can you think of other situations—personal or societal—for which this proverb might be apt?
6. Paul Farmer had an eccentric childhood and his accomplishments have been unique. Do you see a correlation between the way Farmer was raised and how he's chosen to live his life? How has your own background influenced your life and your decisions?
7. Compare Zanmi Lasante to the Socios en Salud project in Carabayllo. Consider how the projects got started, the relationships between doctors and patients, and also the involvement of the international community.
8. Kidder explains that Farmer and his colleagues at PIH were asked by some academics, "Why do you call your patients poor people? They don't call themselves poor people." How do Farmer and Jim Kim confront the issue of how to speak honestly about the people they work to help? How do they learn to speak honestly with each other, and what is the importance of the code words and acronyms that they share (for example, AMC's, or Areas of Moral Clarity)?
9. Ophelia Dahl and Tom White both play critical roles in this book and in the story *Partners in Health*. How are their acts of compassion different from Farmer's?
10. Tracy Kidder has written elsewhere that the choice of point of view is the most important an author makes in constructing a work of narrative non-fiction. He has also written that finding a point of view that works is a matter of making a choice among tools, and that the choice should be determined, not by theory, but by an author's immersion in the materials of the story itself. Kidder has never before written a book in which he made himself a character. Can you think of some of the reasons he might have had for doing this in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*?



## Book: Mountains Beyond Mountains

### Random House Teacher's Guide:

#### Note to Teachers:

*Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* tells the true story of one man's commitment to bring quality health care to the world's poorest communities. Author Tracy Kidder guides students through many physical and philosophical journeys with Dr. Farmer, eloquently articulating Farmer's mission of correcting the inequities and epidemics that plague the poorest people. These journeys with Dr. Farmer constitute an adventure story focused on critical moral issues.

*Mountains Beyond Mountains* raises several profound questions about issues of access to health care and the global distribution of wealth, allowing students a glimpse into Dr. Farmer's work to change the world. Reading this fascinating and inspiring book with your class will provide an opportunity to discuss critical modern political issues and will challenge your students to reflect on their own goals and personal philosophies.

This guide is divided into three categories: Style and Structure, Comprehension and Discussion, and Personal Essays. Questions in the first two sections can be used for oral discussion in small or large groups, or for written assignments. The Personal Essay questions will require longer, personal answers, and are more appropriate as written assignments. Each section can be individualized for your students' interests and reading level, or adapted to meet curriculum demands.

#### About this Author:

Tracy Kidder was born in New York City in 1945. He attended Harvard College and served as a lieutenant in Vietnam. He writes frequently for *Atlantic Monthly* magazine and *The New Yorker*.

After briefly meeting Paul Farmer in Haiti in 1994, Kidder met up with him again in 1999 to begin work on "*The Good Doctor*," a profile of Farmer that was published in *The New Yorker* in July 2000. Kidder's research for *The New Yorker* article became the starting point for *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.

Tracy Kidder won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book award in 1982 for *The Soul of the New Machine*, a book about corporate, high-tech America. Other works include *House* (1985), *Among Schoolchildren* (1989), *Old Friends* (1993), and *Home Town* (1999). His next book, *My Detachment: A Memoir* (due Fall 2005) focuses on his time spent as a lieutenant in Vietnam.

#### Teaching Ideas:

##### Style and Structure

1. Kidder opens *Mountains Beyond Mountains* with an account of a discussion between Paul Farmer and a U.S. army captain who was commanding a small peacekeeping force in Haiti. Farmer and the captain initially discuss a recent murder case in the area, and then move on to discuss the role of the U.S. in Haiti. While the U.S. Army troops had been stationed in Haiti to reinstate the country's democratically elected government and to curb political violence, some of the soldiers were cynical about the effects of their presence in the country. In his reflections on the work of the soldiers, Kidder acknowledges that he shared the soldiers' pessimism, believing that they "had done their best" and that they "would not cry over things beyond their control" in Haiti (page 8). Why do you think that Kidder opens his book with this scene?





## Book: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

### Random House Teacher's Guide: (Continued)

2. Most of Tracy Kidder's other books are not written in the first-person voice. Why do you think he chose to write *Mountains Beyond Mountains* from a first-person perspective? In what ways would the book be different if it were written in the third-person perspective?

3. The title of the book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, is taken from a Haitian proverb that translates as "beyond mountains there are mountains." Why did Kidder use this as the title? What does it mean in terms of Paul Farmer's work?

### Discussion and Writing:

1. On his trips outside of Haiti, Paul Farmer carries two photos to show his colleagues—one of his own daughter Catherine, and one of a young patient at Cange (page 213). Why is it important to Farmer to show both photos?

2. In Chapter 22, Kidder notes that Paul Farmer's "days and nights looked hard and in some ways lonesome." Farmer is very dedicated to his work and has been very successful but in order to do his work, he has also made many personal sacrifices. What sacrifices has Farmer made to pursue his goals? How have these sacrifices affected his relationship with Didi and Catherine, and with his friends?

3. Paul Farmer had a very unusual upbringing in Massachusetts, Alabama, and Florida. What specific elements from his childhood and family life prepared Farmer for his current life? How has your upbringing influenced your own choices and goals in life?

4. Throughout the book, Kidder describes Farmer's interactions with patients. In many cases, Farmer tends to reach out to touch his patients comfortingly and call them by pet names or endearments. Are these gestures typical of modern American doctors? How do these gestures reflect Farmer's philosophy of the role of a doctor?

5. What motivates Paul Farmer to do the work he does? What does he see as his compensation (page 24)?

6. Farmer's philosophy is at odds with standard notions of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. His approach to public health care has drawn criticism because it is not perceived to be cost-effective. For instance, one critic commented that the \$20,000 spent on transporting a sick Haitian child to Boston for treatment could have been better spent on other things, like supplies or drugs for many other children (page 287). What is his response to these arguments? What factors do you think are most important in making such decisions about how money should be spent in public health programs?

7. Paul has trained as a medical anthropologist and as a doctor. Discuss the difference between these two careers with your class. How has his background in medical anthropology complemented his work as a doctor? What specific scenes illustrate Farmer's skills as a medical anthropologist?

8. What is meant by the phrase, "All suffering isn't equal" on page 216? How does this belief shape the work that Paul Farmer, Jim Kim, and Partners in Health do?

9. As Partners in Health grows, Farmer is expected to travel to many places to implement and monitor programs, meet with policy-makers and other doctors, and make presentations on public health issues. His increasing involvement in other programs in Peru and Russia requires that he spend less time in Cange (page 260). How does he describe the inner conflict between serving his patients in Haiti and helping to solve international inequities and epidemics globally?



## Book: Mountains Beyond Mountains

### Random House Teacher's Guide: (Continued)

10. Many people in Cange believe that Paul Farmer “works with both hands,” meaning that he works both with science and with the magic necessary to remove Voodoo curses (page 27). How did he learn about the role of Voodoo in the lives of the residents of Cange? How does Farmer interpret the continuing presence of Voodoo in modern Haitian life?

11. Early members of Partners in Health refer frequently to an idea from the Catholic liberation theology movement, of “preferential option for the poor” (pages 78 and 81). How does Farmer’s life and work reflect this particular theology? What are some other examples of the role of faith and religion in Paul Farmer’s work?

### Suggested Activities:

#### Personal Essay

1. Do you think that Farmer has struck an appropriate balance between acting locally and acting globally? How do you think he should prioritize his responsibilities toward his Haitian patients, PIH’s other international programs, and the global public health community?
2. What responsibilities do you think individuals in wealthier nations have toward people in poor countries? How has reading this account of Paul Farmer’s work changed your ideas about your responsibility or obligations toward people who are poorer than you are? What do you think is the best way to express or act on this sense of responsibility?
3. In many of his projects and activities, Paul Farmer achieves his goals by subverting policies. For example, while there is officially a fee for patient services at Zanmi Lasante, he has made a long list of exceptions, so that in fact almost no one has to pay for services (page 21). While he was in medical school, he “borrowed” tens of thousands of dollars worth of drugs and lab services from Brigham and Young Hospital on behalf of his patients at Zanmi Lasante by charming the pharmacists and lab workers (page 149). How do you feel about his unconventional approach to problem solving? Do you think that he could be more effective by working within a framework of existing policies and institutional structures, or by working to change policies that he sees as oppressive to the poor?
4. In the final paragraph of the book, Kidder makes a reference to the time he spent with the American soldiers before he met Paul Farmer and of how he regarded the plight of the suffering people. In what ways have Kidder and his viewpoints changed since first meeting Farmer? How did your own perception of Farmer’s life and work change, if it did, as you read the book?



## **Book:** Mountains Beyond Mountains

### **Random House Teacher's Guide: (Continued)**

#### **About this Guide:**

Reading Level: 10

This Teacher's Guide is recommended for use by high school educators.

#### **About the Teacher's Guide Writer:**

Heather Kelly received her Master's degree in Public Administration and Economic and Political Development from Columbia University's School of International and Public Health and her Bachelor's degree in English Literature from the College of William and Mary. She taught English at a high school in Papua New Guinea with the Peace Corps, and since then has worked on numerous international public health and economic development projects. She has worked with several non-governmental agencies and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in East Timor, Nunavut, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda.



## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

### Reviews:

*Booklist Review, July 2003*

Kidder, a master documentarian, has primarily practiced his art on his home turf, Massachusetts, proving that one small place abounds in amazing stories. Now, in his most compelling chronicle to date, this Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner investigates a far harsher world in the company of Paul Farmer, a radical public health reformer devoted to providing medical care to the poor, mainly in Haiti. A Harvard-educated medical anthropologist, TB expert, and MacArthur "genius" gifted with an unshakable moral imperative, an ardent imagination, and limitless energy, compassion, and chutzpah, Farmer created Partners in Health, a renegade yet hugely influential organization. A powerful presence, this uncompromising visionary is too spectacularly impressive not to be disconcerting, and Kidder shares his puzzlement over and occasional discomfort with this charismatic and tirelessly giving man who eschews personal comfort to care for the "underdogs of the underdogs." As Kidder accompanies Farmer on his exhausting and risky daily routines and epic travels, he parses the cruel realities of deep poverty and the maddening politics of international health care. Most importantly, Kidder portrays a genuinely inspired and heroic individual, whose quest for justice will make every reader examine her or his life in a new light. (Reviewed July 2003) Copyright 2003 *Booklist Reviews*

*Library Journal Review, May 2003*

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

Kidder profiles American doctor/anthropologist Paul Farmer, who has dedicated his life to helping poorest Haitians. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information.

*Library Journal Review, August 2003*

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

In his latest work, Pulitzer Prize winner Kidder (*Among Schoolchildren; The Soul of a New Machine*) turns his documentarian gaze on the life and work of Paul Farmer, a medical anthropologist and physician who has spent much of the past 20 years transforming healthcare in the impoverished central plateau of Haiti. Part biography, part public health text, and part travelogue, his book follows Farmer from his childhood in Florida and Harvard medical education to his establishment of the Haitian clinic Zanmi Lasante and current status as an international expert in treating communicable diseases, such as AIDS and tuberculosis. Farmer's work is fascinating-as is the author's compassionate portrayal of the lives of the Haitians with whom his subject lives and works; if the book has a flaw, it is that it attempts to cover too much territory. Instead of trying to cram three books into one, Kidder could have taken any one of the three approaches that he used and made a complete and captivating study. However, he does include an excellent annotated bibliography for readers who desire more information on any of the themes covered in the book. Recommended for public libraries and public health collections. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 5/1/03.]-Eris Weaver, Redwood Health Lib., Petaluma, CA Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information.





## Book: Mountains Beyond Mountains

### Reviews: (Continued)

*School Library Journal Review, January 2004*

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

Adult/High School-Thought-provoking and profoundly satisfying, this book will inspire feelings of humility, admiration, and disquietude; in some readers, it may sow the seeds of humanitarian activism. As a specialist in infectious diseases, Farmer's goal is nothing less than redressing the "steep gradient of inequality" in medical service to the desperately poor. His work establishing a complex of public health facilities on the central plateau of Haiti forms the keystone to efforts that now encompass initiatives on three continents. Farmer and a trio of friends began in the 1980s by creating a charitable foundation called Partners in Health (PIH, or Zanmi Lasante in Creole), armed with passionate conviction and \$1 million in seed money from a Boston philanthropist. Kidder provides anecdotal evidence that their early approach to acquiring resources for the Haitian project at times involved a Robin Hood type of "redistributive justice" by liberating medical equipment from the "rich" (Harvard) and giving to the "poor" (the PIH clinic). Yet even as PIH has grown in size and sophistication, gaining the ability to influence and collaborate with major international organizations because of the founders' energy, professional credentials, and successful outcomes, their dedicated vision of doctoring to the poor remains unaltered. Farmer's conduct is offered as a "road map to decency," albeit an uncompromising model that nearly defies replication. This story is remarkable, and Kidder's skill in sequencing both dramatic and understated elements into a reflective commentary is unsurpassed.-Lynn Nutwell, Fairfax City Regional Library, VA Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information.

*BookPage Review, September 2003*

Website: <http://www.bookpage.com>

### The Good Doctor

Compared to Dr. Paul Farmer, Mother Teresa was a slacker. But she had better PR. That may change with the publication of *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Tracy Kidder's engaging biography of the selfless, tireless, good-humored and still relatively young physician. Kidder, who won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for *The Soul of a New Machine* (1981), has been following the 44-year-old Farmer's work on behalf of the poor since 1994.

Born in Massachusetts, Farmer grew up on the Gulf Coast of Florida, where his family lived on an old bus and a salvaged boat. Despite these privations, he graduated at the top of his high school class and won a full scholarship to Duke University. While pursuing his degree there, he became interested in public health policies, particularly as they affected the downtrodden.

Farmer began working with the poor in Haiti in 1983, the year before he entered Harvard Medical School. There, he met Ophelia Dahl, the daughter of actress Patricia Neal and writer Roald Dahl, who was working as a volunteer at an eye clinic. She would later bring her considerable administrative skills to the service of Farmer's far-ranging vision. Farmer's passion for helping the helpless also caught the attention of Boston philanthropist Tom White, who donated money for a clinic in the central Haitian village of Cange and set up the Partners in Health charity to help Farmer fund his projects.

For his part, Farmer contributed both his own income and around-the-clock attention to his patients, whether in Boston or Haiti. On the faculty at Harvard, he soon rose to the post of professor of medicine and medical anthropology.



## Book: Mountains Beyond Mountains

### Reviews: (Continued)

Kidder accompanies Farmer as he trudges across the unforgiving Haitian countryside to care for patients or as he attends public health conferences and strategy sessions in Russia, Cuba, France, Peru, Canada and Mexico. Farmer's amalgam of commitment, genius and energy constitutes a near irresistible force, and Kidder's wonderful book is an antidote for cynics. Copyright 2003 *BookPage* Reviews

#### *Choice Review*, October 2004

Website: <http://www.choicereviews.org>

This work chronicles the life of Dr. Paul Farmer, a physician and medical anthropologist who has become a leading expert on infectious diseases. Farmer is also cofounder of Partners in Health, an organization that collaborates with indigenous health care providers to establish clinics for underserved rural populations in Haiti, Peru, and Siberia. He began traveling to Haiti in the early 1980s and established Zanmi Lasante, a clinic that is located in a setting so inhospitable that all but one of the Haitian doctors whom Farmer employed chose to live elsewhere. Though *Mountains Beyond Mountains* is intended as a biography, it focuses almost exclusively on Farmer's medical practice. Kidder, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, writes clearly and engagingly as he invokes Farmer's saintly presence (inviting comparisons to Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa). At other times, however, Kidder allows Farmer's less saintly ambitions to emerge. This book is being widely used in freshman seminars at colleges across the United States, and it will likely stir debates on such wide-ranging issues as the politics of health care, the role of government funding, and ethics. Summing Up: Highly recommended. General readers and undergraduates. Copyright 2004 American Library Association.

#### *Kirkus Reviews*, July 2003

Full-immersion journalist Kidder (*Home Town*, 1999, etc.) tries valiantly to keep up with a front-line, muddy-and-bloody general in the war against infectious disease in Haiti and elsewhere. The author occasionally confesses to weariness in this gripping account—and why not? Paul Farmer, who has an M.D. and a Ph.D. from Harvard, appears to be almost preternaturally intelligent, productive, energetic, and devoted to his causes. So trotting alongside him up Haitian hills, through international airports and Siberian prisons and Cuban clinics, may be beyond the capacity of a mere mortal. Kidder begins with a swift account of his first meeting with Farmer in Haiti while working on a story about American soldiers, then describes his initial visit to the doctor's clinic, where the journalist felt he'd "encountered a miracle." Employing guile, grit, grins, and gifts from generous donors (especially Boston contractor Tom White), Farmer has created an oasis in Haiti where TB and AIDS meet their Waterloos. The doctor has an astonishing rapport with his patients and often travels by foot for hours over difficult terrain to treat them in their dwellings ("houses" would be far too grand a word). Kidder pauses to fill in Farmer's amazing biography: his childhood in an eccentric family sounds like something from *The Mosquito Coast*; a love affair with Roald Dahl's daughter ended amicably; his marriage to a Haitian anthropologist produced a daughter whom he sees infrequently thanks to his frenetic schedule. While studying at Duke and Harvard, Kidder writes, Farmer became obsessed with public health issues; even before he'd finished his degrees he was spending much of his time in Haiti establishing the clinic that would give him both immense personal satisfaction and unsurpassed credibility in the medical worlds he hopes to influence. Skilled and graceful exploration of the soul of an astonishing human being. Agent: Georges Borchardt Copyright *Kirkus* 2003 *Kirkus*/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.



## Book: Mountains Beyond Mountains

### Reviews: (Continued)

*Publishers Weekly Review*, July 2003

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

In this excellent work, Pulitzer Prize-winner Kidder (*The Soul of a New Machine*) immerses himself in and beautifully explores the rich drama that exists in the life of Dr. Paul Farmer. A Massachusetts native who has been working in Haiti since 1982, Farmer founded Zanmi Lasante (Creole for Partners in Health), a nongovernmental organization that is the only health-care provider for hundreds of thousands of peasant farmers in the Plateau Central. He did this while juggling work in Haiti and study at the Harvard Medical School. (Farmer received his M.D. and a Ph.D. in anthropology simultaneously in 1990.) During his work in Haiti, Farmer pioneered a community-based treatment method for patients with tuberculosis that, Kidder explains, has had better clinical outcomes than those in U.S. inner cities. For this work, Farmer was recognized in 1993 with a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," all of which he donated to Zanmi Lasante. Using interviews with family members and various friends and associates, Kidder provides a sympathetic account of Farmer's early life, from his idiosyncratic family to his early days in Haiti. Kidder also recounts his time with Farmer as he travels to Moscow; Lima, Peru; Boston; and other cities where Farmer relentlessly seeks funding and educates people about the hard conditions in Haiti. Throughout, Kidder captures the almost saintly effect Farmer has on those whom he treats. (Sept.) Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information.